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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/PI

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SUBJECT: OMAN PARTICIPATION IN SMALL BUSINESS INITIATIVE  
FOR WOMEN

REF: STATE 115408

¶1. (U) Post highly recommends Oman for implementation of the proposed MEPI Small Business Initiative for Women (SBIFW). Omani businesswomen represent a rapidly growing segment of the private sector and as such are increasingly requesting training and assistance. These requests range from support for low-income women making and selling handicrafts to entrepreneurship training and business development skills for women who have or want to start their own businesses. In addition, government bodies are asking for technical assistance to implement effective strategies to develop and promote small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs), including those run by women.

¶2. (U) Government efforts to support entrepreneurial growth center around the SME Directorate at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and, to a lesser extent, the recently formed Businesswomen's Forum (BWF) under the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI). The SME Directorate, with MEPI-funded technical assistance from Booz Allen Hamilton (BAH), is currently developing a strategy to better meet the needs of its target business community. For example, it hopes to offer "incubators" to entrepreneurs, open a business development center, develop a loan guarantee program, and establish a clinic for "sick" businesses to get guidance and advice. The SME Directorate has also communicated great interest in supporting and building the capacity of businesswomen in Oman. With the end of the BAH assistance program in December 2008, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry has expressed its desire for future MEPI partnerships to strengthen the work and effectiveness of the Directorate and is open to assistance focused on women.

¶3. (SBU) The BWF has been off to a slow start since its launch in July 2007. The appointed president admitted that the delay in the Forum's progress partly stems from her inexperience in setting up such a body. She has accordingly articulated her desire for assistance in developing the BWF, such as instruction on how to run BWF elections and assistance in setting up a series of workshops and training sessions that respond to the needs of businesswomen in Oman. The BWF recently accepted an invitation to join the MEPI-funded MENA Businesswomen's Network which should help provide it with resources to help support local businesswoman, but the BSF will need further direction if it is to meet its aspirations.

¶4. (U) Inclusion of Oman in the SBIFW program would strongly compliment previous and current MEPI support to bodies working with women in business. Post recommends that this initiative work with the SME Directorate to offer services and support for businesswomen through the establishment of a small business development center, a loan guarantee program, or similar mechanisms. Post also proposes that the SBIFW offer organizational capacity building and assistance for the BWF as part of its programming in Oman.

